

Philemon – John Karmelich

1. Why is forgiveness such an essential aspect of Christianity? If you think about the "Lord's Prayer" there is only one line in that prayer that we are required to do: Forgive others. Everything else in that prayer are things we're asking God to do for us. Do we have to forgive everyone who's hurt us in order to be saved? What about legitimate ways people hurt us? What about the ways some have to live out the rest of their lives in pain because others had hurt them? Where exactly do we draw the line on forgiveness versus allowing further pain? What about "due" punishment? If we forgive a thief, does he or she get to avoid prison if we forgive them?
 - a) I could go on from here, but hopefully, you're getting the idea that the issue of forgiveness is a big topic in Christianity. Yes it's easy to say God's forgiven us of all our sins, so in turn we should forgive others, but what about the pain they've caused. Will our forgiveness in turn allow other people to "walk all over us" if they know we'll just forgive them?
2. Believe it or not the answer to all these questions are engulfed in this short one chapter letter to a man named Philemon from Paul the Apostle. Which reminds me, there are only three key people in this letter, so let me discuss the "who's" quickly, as that explains much of the letter.
 - a) The first is Paul. For my newcomers, Paul was not one of the original 12 apostles. It's best to describe his history as a man God called while he was persecuting Christians. After he was converted, he dedicated the rest of his life to spreading the Gospel. The book of Acts describes that conversion and much of Paul's history after that. "Philemon" is a letter from Paul to a man named Philemon probably written near the end of Paul's life. The final part of the book of Acts describes Paul in prison in Rome. That wasn't how his life ended. He was released and according to church history he did another missionary journey before he was killed for being a Christian. My key point here is that Paul understood what it meant to forgive someone, as he himself understood how much God had forgiven him. That did include the fact Paul had Christians put to death before he was converted himself.
 - b) The second key character in this "one act play" is a man named Philemon. I admit, when I study this book I get the two other characters mixed up. The way I remember who is who is I think of Philemon as having money so I made up the word "Philemoney". All that I'm saying is if you associate Philemon as having money, it helps to keep the names straight.
 - c) The third and final major character in this story is a man named "Onesimus". I pronounce his name as "One" "See" and "Must". He was a runaway slave. For his name, I use a word picture of "oh, see, I must, a slave". (I then picture a man in chains.) My sole point is these "word pictures" help me to keep these two characters straight as to who's who.
 - d) The good news is that's it. So if you can remember that there is a run away slave, the one who owns the slave and Paul, that's the three people you need to keep straight here.
 - e) OK that's neat. What do all three of these men have to do with all those forgiveness issues I brought up to start the lesson? Thought you'd never ask. To answer, I need to explain a little background as it explains the situation well and explains why forgiveness is the key topic of this letter.
3. In order to explain that, I probably need to talk a little about slavery in the Roman Empire. It was the largest worldwide empire in history and included all the land around the Mediterranean Sea. Slaves were used for the manual labor of that empire. I've read that between one to two thirds of the empire's population were slaves. Paul never directly confronted slavery as an issue. Indirectly he taught how wrong it was to have that type of relationship in a society. The issue of forgiveness incorporates slavery forgiveness. The growth of Christianity within the Roman Empire did bring slavery to an end. It was devout Christians in England and the United States to help end slavery. Yes it took a civil war in the United States to end that way of life. In England it took some tricks by some people who fought to end slavery, but it ended. It still exists in a few areas of the world, but where Christianity dominates a society, slavery isn't an issue.

- a) The reason I bring all that up, is Onesimus was a runaway slave. He stole money from his master, which was Philemon. Again, the "must be a slave stole from the money guy", and that's how I keep the names straight. A key point of this story is that Onesimus was once a slave to Philemon. Onesimus stole from him and ran away to Rome to hide.
 - b) Next, I need to talk a little about the locations of these people. Philemon lived in Colossae. It's the city that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians. It's a city in modern Turkey today. What bible experts speculate is that Philemon became a Christian during a 3-year span of time when Paul preached in the nearby city of Ephesus. (See Acts Chapter 19). The point of all of this is Philemon became a Christian and started a church in his home. Apparently Philemon was wealthy enough that he owned slaves. That leads us to Onesimus.
 - c) In the Roman Empire, it was a death sentence for a slave to run away. Slaves that escaped often went to Rome, which was the largest city in that empire. The population of that city was just under 900,000 at that time. A runaway slave could be with the "dregs of society" in the slums of Rome and hide from the authorities. During that time, Onesimus met Paul when he was under "house arrest" for the crime of being a Christian. We don't know how Onesimus became a Christian. We do know he changed his life when he became one and then he helped Paul while he was under "house arrest" in Rome.
4. All of that background leads to this story. Here was this runaway slave named Onesimus, who is a big help to Paul. Paul also knew his slave owner Philemon well, as Paul lead him to Jesus.
- a) Paul helped Philemon set up a church in his house, as no church buildings existed then.
 - b) Therefore, Philemon owed Paul a huge debt of gratitude, as Paul lead him to Jesus.
 - c) When Paul met Onesimus, maybe Paul remembered him from his days with Philemon or he learned of that history in his time in prison in Rome. Either way, Paul knew the story.
5. All of that leads to the issue of forgiveness. Paul's desire was for Onesimus to forgive Philemon.
- a) With this letter, Paul is sending Onesimus "home" to Philemon.
 - b) Remember that Onesimus stole money from him as well as ran away.
 - c) If Philemon forgives him as Paul asks, what message does that send to other slaves?
 - d) If Philemon forgives him, what about the legitimate pain he felt by what Onesimus did?
 - e) Just because Onesimus is a devout Christian, is that alone grounds for forgiveness?
 - f) These are the underlying questions of this one chapter letter.
 - g) Hopefully I can talk you into reading the rest of this study with me, not to know the result of this ancient history as we don't know the results. The important thing is to understand why God expects us to forgive, especially for ways people have legitimately hurt us. The answers to those types of questions are found in this one chapter book.
 - h) Oh, if you haven't figured it out by now, my one word title for this lesson is "Forgiveness".
 - i) With that said, let's start the verse-by-verse commentary of this short book, and hopefully we can all learn a few more things on how God expects us to forgive others and why!
6. Philemon Verse 1: Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:
- a) Verses 1 and 2 teach us who's sending the letter and to whom it's being sent.
 - b) The "from" is Paul and Timothy. Yes it's the same Timothy of "1st and 2nd Timothy". He is a young assistant who helped Paul. In fact, when Paul was arrested the second time for being a Christian and was about to be killed for that crime, that's when 2nd Timothy was written. All I'm saying is at this point in their lives, they were together. I suspect Paul is dictating this letter and Timothy wrote it down.
 - c) Keep in mind that Paul was a prisoner at that time. I picture Paul being chained up to the wall or other guards. Yet Paul doesn't say he's a prisoner of Rome, but a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I picture Paul in his chains being physically reminded who he's "really chained to" as Paul uses his life as a witness to Jesus. Notice there is no "Paul the apostle" greeting. It is written to someone who knew Paul intimately and knew his background.

- d) The second part of this introduction states who this letter is written to:
 - i) Philemon is the main character. As Verse 2 states, he lead a church that met in his house. For what it's worth, there's no archeological evidence of church structures until the middle of the 3rd Century. In late 1st Century, Christians met in homes.
 - ii) What most commentators logically speculate is the other two people named in the letter are Philemon's wife and son.
 - iii) The key point being that Paul new Philemon and lead him to the Lord. Most likely Paul helped Philemon set up this church that met in his house. That would explain how Paul would know the name of his wife and son. It's speculation, but it's most likely given the personal nature of this letter.
 - iv) We'll discover later in this epistle that the same group of people who delivered the epistle also were carrying Paul's letter to the Colossians. That would make sense as it's the same town. Remember Paul wrote this letter from Rome. Colossae is a part of Turkey today. This letter traveled a good distance to get there.
 - v) Since I discussed the who, and the where's, all that's left is when. Most scholars do place this letter at about 62AD.
 - vi) Now that we got the "who's, where's and when's" straightened out, onto the letter:
7. Verse 3: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- a) Here we get Paul's favorite way to say "hello". It's for God's grace and peace to be with us from both the Father and the Son.
 - b) While I'm in the neighborhood, let me explain why God's grace always comes before His peace in any introduction. The essential idea is because God unconditionally forgives us of all our sins, and therefore blesses us with His love even though we don't deserve it, we can have peace with God because of that grace. I assume most us Christians instinctively know that, but it doesn't hurt to mention it since it's common in Paul's letters.
 - c) Remember that Paul's writing this letter to someone he knew intimately and cares about. Paul is writing this to a man and his family who started a bible study meeting in his home and cares about spreading the Gospel message as much as Paul does. Therefore, the letter starts as a way of reminding us what all us Christians have in common.
 - d) Let me also discuss the word "Lord" again, as we throw it around lightly. When we think of Lord, we think of someone we respect as being "over us". In the bible, civic leaders can be thought as Lord, and the God we worship can be thought of as Lord. In many versions of the bible the word LORD is in all capitals when it wants to emphasize God's most holy name. My point here is that Paul thought of Jesus as being in charge of his life and he did also write in Romans 10:9 that to be saved, one had to believe Jesus is God, He did die for our sins and (the big "and") Jesus is Lord of our lives. Anyway, that's why "Lord" is part of this opening greeting.
8. Verse 4: I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶ I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.
- a) Does Verse 4 imply that Paul prayed for Philemon every day? Paul must have had a long list of people he prayed for as he started lots of churches all over the Roman Empire. As I read that line, what I think is, that every time Paul thought about Philemon and his name popped up in Paul's head, he realized how grateful he was for that man and Paul thanked God for his help in that city. That's how Paul more likely prayed for this man.
 - b) Then we get the reason why Paul was so grateful for Philemon. It's because this man had a lot of love for Jesus and for other Christians (i.e., put other's needs before his own).
 - c) The encouragement and blessings continue as Paul said he's praying that Philemon is still active in sharing his faith with others and realize all the good things we have in Jesus.
 - d) OK, obviously Paul's buttering up Philemon for some big request, and we'll get to that in a few verses. I'm convinced Paul was sincere here as he saw Philemon as a fellow worker.

- e) Before I move on, it might be a good time to pause for a moment and ask, "What are those good things we each have in Jesus?" It's easy to think, I'm saved, but so are a multitude of other Christians. What's the good things we have in Jesus? Yes, of course we can say our salvation. What we really should appreciate is the fact we don't have to earn His love. We don't have to work to impress Him as He already knows all things. We're called to live in a way that stands out, not to impress Him, but just out of gratitude for what He's already done for us. The "good things" is that God's given us a purpose for living. He's given us a sense of joy no matter what's going on in our lives because we know we have that sense of eternal peace. To quote many older Christians I know, "I'm not afraid of death. I'd like to avoid pain, but death itself doesn't scare me." That's the assurance we have in trusting in Jesus as well as a flavor of the "good things". My point is if you're ever feeling depressed about one's life, one has to see it from the perspective that God has a purpose for us, as He wants to bless us with "good things" based on our trust in Him.
- f) OK now that we're all feeling a little better about our Christian life, let's return to the issue of why is Paul "battering up" Philemon or at the least reminding him how he's been using his life for the greatest purpose one can have, making a difference for God?
- i) Paul's asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus for what he did. I think Philemon has gotten to a point in his life where he moved on. He probably thought, I don't know what ever happened to him, but if I find him one day, I don't know if I can forgive him, as he hurt me not only by running away, but also by stealing from me.
 - ii) The hardest thing to forgive is the legitimate ways people have hurt us. What we learn as Christians is we must forgive them (here's the important part), so as to not let them hurt us even more. When we hold on to that hurt we continue to let them hurt us. The person who did the hurting, probably moved on and doesn't think of what they did. We forgive not to avoid punishing the guilty, but so that person is no longer causing us pain.
 - iii) That brings us back to Philemon: If he's like a normal person, I'm sure he has let go of that pain, but probably thought, "If I ever see him again, I have to punish him so others won't get the same idea." Even if Philemon now thought slavery was wrong there is still the issue of stealing, as Onesimus stole money from him. Again, we're back to the question of how do we balance forgiveness with punishment?
 - iv) I bring all this up even before we get into the issue itself, because I want you to see how Paul's effectively saying, "Think of all the good things God's done for you and how much God's forgiven you of your sins. Now I want you (that's us) to have the same attitude about forgiving others who've hurt us, even legitimately."
 - v) Most of us can think of way's we've been legitimately hurt by those around us. It's easy to hang on to the pain, as often that's all we have left in the relationship. What God's called us to do is let go of that pain, as it blocks our relationship with Him. It is hard for us to be loving to others, when we hold on to how others have hurt us. I know it's especially true when that pain is legitimate. So how do we let it go? The best thing I know is to pray daily for the person who hurt us. Start seeing them as someone who needs God's love and forgiveness and not someone who's hurt us. It is the age-old story that if we expect God to forgive us of all our sins, shouldn't we have the same attitude toward others who have hurt us, no matter what they have done? The legitimate pain is the one we have to let go of the most.
 - vi) What if that person still wants to hurt us? That's a separate issue. Of course I want people to get away from those who still want to hurt us. That goes without saying.
- g) Gee John, this is all wonderful advice. However, the text is about Paul complimenting his friend here for being a good Christian. Aren't you jumping ahead of the story? Yes, but I want all of us to see why Paul's complimenting him here. Paul's giving Philemon a good reputation to live up to. He wants him to see how key forgiveness is in life.

- h) In the meantime, Paul's got one more line of encouragement for Philemon, before he gets to the heart of the matter:
9. Verse 7: Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.
- a) Was Paul sincere in this flattery? I'm sure of it. What gave Paul the greatest joy in his life is when he saw other Christians share the love of Jesus with others. Paul saw his purpose in life as to spread the Gospel message, so others can have the joy in life of using their life as a witness for Jesus as Paul did. What made him happy wasn't all the travel or speaking in all those places about Jesus, but it was in seeing the results. It was in seeing the lives of others change so they too could have God's peace and joy in their lives.
- b) The reason Paul prayed for Philemon, is he saw him as one who encouraged others to also believe in Jesus they way Paul did. Personally, I can't think of anything in life that'll bring us more joy than seeing others have joy around us. It's contagious. The greatest way for us to share that joy is when we share our love for Jesus with others. It spreads joy to those around us.
- c) I can just hear some of you thinking, "Yes I believe all that, but I don't know how to share my faith, or I'm too scared to share my faith with others." The early church prayed for the ability to have boldness, which is something most Christians rarely think to pray for. We should also pray for opportunities to share our faith with others. Since that's what God is desiring of us, I promise that if we pray that, God will encourage you in your faith and He will give us such opportunities. My point is it's not as hard we think it is. All it takes is a little act of kindness to someone. When we put other's needs as priority over our own, we are "refreshing the hearts of the saints" whether we realize it or not.
- d) Anyway, Paul saw Philemon as someone who "got it" and Paul's sincerely complimenting Philemon as he opened his house for bible studies and encouraged others to draw close to Jesus in their life. That alone makes life worth living and that's what Paul's saying here in this verse.
10. Verse 8: Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do,⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul--an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.
- a) Now we come to the heart of the letter. I can just picture Philemon reading this, with his ego going up a few notches with every compliment, coming to the name Onesimus. If it were me, I'd be thinking at that point, "I forgot about him. Yes he hurt me, and yes if I'm going to forgive him that debt, how will that look to others around me? Will others think they can walk all over me if I just forgive him for what he did?"
- b) Realize that Onesimus is going to be delivered with this letter. It had to shock Philemon to see him again. How does Philemon mix all the positive comments Paul said about him with the fact that Onesimus is "staring him in the face?" How would you feel if you were now face to face with the person who harmed you most in life? Would you immediately forget all the compliments you got in that letter if you were faced with that situation? Can you let go of that pain, based on the reality of what God's done for us? I'm not saying it'd be easy to do. Forgiveness of true ways people have hurt us is hard to put it mildly. Then to have to see that person face to face again, would just flood back all the memories of the ways we've been hurt all over again.
- c) The good news is Christian history is full of stories of people who've let go of that pain as they've then used their lives to help others, even others who remind them of the pain that they've caused. I personally know of some war veterans who've done just that as they've gone back to help the same type of people who've hurt them in the past. It's their way of showing how God's forgiven them and they then want to use their lives to forgive others.
- d) With that said, let me return for the moment to Paul's relationship with Onesimus:

- i) Remember that Paul was a prisoner in Rome. There is a the distinct possibility of Onesimus being arrested for being a runaway slave or some other crime, and then meeting Paul in jail. Paul may have remembered Onesimus from his days when he worked with Philemon or Paul may have just made the connection as Paul told the story of Jesus to Onesimus.
- ii) As the old saying goes, "Coincidence is not a kosher word." God made it possible for Onesimus to be near Paul so that he could preach the gospel message to him.
- iii) Not only did Onesimus get saved, but apparently he became "useful" to Paul. We can see the play on words where Onesimus because "useless" to Philemon, but he's now useful to Paul as a helper to him in prison.
- iv) Paul's appeal to Philemon is essentially, "Onesimus is a changed man. He's not the same man he used to be. Treat him as one who's useful and forgive him of his sins of stealing from you and running away from you." Don't do it because he deserves to be forgiven, do it because that's how God's called us to live as a witness for Him in this world. That's Paul's case in a nutshell.
- v) By the way did Philemon forgive him? We don't know for sure. We don't know if he wrote a return letter to Paul. Church history records that a church leader arose named Onesimus in that area, but we can't say for sure it's the same man.
- vi) Of course all this ancient history, is just that, ancient history. The important issue for you and me is, are we willing to forgive someone who's legitimately hurt us?
- vii) Are we willing to let go of the emotional pain of how they've hurt us so that what they did doesn't block our relationship with God? That's why He wants us to go forgive others, as to not let that pain block our relationship with Him and with the other people around us.
- viii) I can just hear some of you thinking, "That's all well and good, but you don't know how bad I've been hurt. You don't know what someone did to me." I'm not saying criminals have to avoid being punished by society for their crimes. I'm saying that in order for us to have peace, we have to let go of that pain so they won't continue to hurt us. I've known a number of people who've written letters to those who've hurt them just to let them know they've forgiven them for what they've done so as to not let them hurt them anymore. I'm also aware there are many people who see that as a sign of weakness and attack you some more. Therefore, we may not send that letter off, but we may need to write it, just to let go of the pain.
- e) Meanwhile, "back at the ranch" in Paul's jail cell, he realized that Onesimus was a changed man, and realized it was time to let go of how Onesimus was helpful to him, so he can go back to Colossae and bring healing to the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon.
 - i) If Paul was only thinking of himself, he'd be thinking, who cares about Onesimus' relationship with Philemon, this man is very helpful to me here. However, Paul is aware the right thing to do is to heal the relationship between those two. I'm sure that Paul heard the story of what Onesimus did and Paul wanted to bring that part of Onesimus' life to an end. Paul sent him home to face that situation. Realize Paul was taking a risk by doing this as he didn't know what Philemon's reaction would be to a request to forgive Onesimus. Paul's going to give Philemon extra incentive, coming up later in this letter.
- f) Stop and think how a run away slave would act: That crime was punishable by death if he was caught. Slaves could seek asylum in "churches", but once they walked away from the location of that "church", they could be arrested. I see Onesimus as a changed man. Verse 10 said he was a big help to Paul "in his chains". A criminal wouldn't normally go around being helpful to someone like Paul who's trying to lead others to worship the single God. My point is that Onesimus is a changed man, as living for Jesus changes one's perspective on life and what's important. I give Onesimus credit for being a witness for Jesus then.

11. Verse 12: I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.
- a) Here's the "money" verses: Here's where Paul tells Philemon that it's time to forgive this former slave and accept Onesimus as a fellow Christian. One has to imagine how hard it had to be for Philemon. How willing are you willing to forgive someone who stole from you? Even if you forgave them, would you let such a person back in your house again? What do you think the other slaves in Philemon's world would say to Onesimus? Would they be encouraged to steal or at least run away to go find Paul?
 - b) I'm trying to think of the hardest sin I'd have to forgive. Let's say someone hurt one of my daughters. Even if they went to prison for years and became born-again while in prison, I don't know if I could ever let go of the pain of how much they hurt the ones I love. We all know the hardest pain to forgive is the legitimate ones. I never said it was easy. Usually it requires time and prayer to let go of real painful events and considering the actions of that type of forgiveness.
 - c) With a tough thing to forgive in mind, imagine Paul sending Onesimus home. It had to be a scary thing for him to go "face the music". Even though Onesimus helped Paul when he was in a jail cell, Paul was the catalyst to reconcile this issue.
 - d) Notice Paul's subtlety in describing the issue. Paul didn't call Onesimus the run away. He just said, "Since he was separated for you for awhile". Paul's playing down the sin, not so much to ease his crimes, but to help Philemon with the difficult part, which is forgiveness. Notice Paul didn't say, "God requires us to forgive others, so get at it!" Instead he requests that Onesimus be loved as a brother in the Lord.
 - e) Let me take on the question another way: Could Philemon require Onesimus to remain as a slave? Sure, there were lots of home churches at that time where slaves were elders in a home church and still slaves when not in that role. Yes it was unheard of for a slave in the Roman culture to be a leader over freemen, but that was one way that Christians showed love to others by that action.
 - f) The problem is Philemon was a church leader. He not only should forgive as that's what Jesus commanded us to do, but also as a leader he needed to be an example to others.
 - g) Again, try to think of the hardest thing one can imagine. Say killing a love one or making them suffer in some way that they're damaged for life. Could you forgive them? Realize there is a difference between punishment for society's sake and forgiveness so bad people wouldn't go on hurting you. That's the issue here.
 - i) Let me get practical for a moment on this one. Years ago, someone hurt me badly by stealing from my wife and I. The only way I could let go of that pain was to go get on my knees daily and pray for his salvation. I haven't seen him since and I've no idea what became of him. I just know it took a lot prayer to see him as a person who needs God's forgiveness and not someone who hurt me. If I saw him today, I wouldn't lend him money again, but my hatred is gone. That is sort of what Paul's asking Philemon to do. Let go of the pain Onesimus caused Philemon, and accept him in his house as someone he loves and forgives.
 - h) Something else to consider here. People think that Christianity is all about leading people to Jesus and then forgetting about them. All three of the major characters in this story are saved. Yet Paul didn't say, "you two are now saved, go on your merry way, goodbye!"
 - i) The point is Paul wanted both of them to grow in their faith in Jesus. A big growth step would be for Onesimus to face his old master again and for Philemon to let go of the pain of someone who stole from him. In both cases it took courage.

- ii) OK, then, how do we have the courage to do the right thing? Do we just suck it up and go forward? Not exactly. What God promises us is the strength to do what is the right thing. What I also find is God works on our level. I remember back when I first started my relationship with Jesus. I knew I needed to break up with the girl I was dating at the time. Let's just say God "made it easy" for me and helped me in that step.
 - a) What I'm saying is if you've got a tough forgiveness assignment or for that matter any action that God would approve of, ask for His help if it's a hard thing to do. I find God's more than willing to help us if the goal is to draw closer to Him by such an action.
 - i) Anyway, the key point of these verses, is that Onesimus was being "delivered" along with the letter. Think about the long walk (or boat rides) that Onesimus had to take to get back to Colossae. Think about all the time Onesimus had to think about his actions and ponder the reaction of his former master. Thankfully, he didn't have to travel alone and I'd guess the other Christians on the trip had to encourage Onesimus to keep going forward.
 - j) By the way, let me answer how the Romans would react to this. If those who traveled to Colossae with Onesimus were asked about his slave status, they could say they're taking him back to his master. The Roman guards would let them pass if that was said.
 - k) Meanwhile, Paul's not done writing to Philemon. We actually have one more big issue to bring up in the next few verses:
12. Verse 17: So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back--not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.
- a) The first thing to notice here, is how Paul appealed to Philemon. Paul doesn't say I order you to forgive Onesimus. He doesn't say God commands you to forgive him. Paul's only appeal is as a "partner in the Gospel". It's kind of like saying, "This is the right thing to do here and I realize it's hard to do. No one said forgiveness was easy. However if you think of yourself as my partner in the Gospel, that is, someone who is dedicating their life to be teaching others of Jesus' love and the free gift He's given the world, then do what I (Paul) would do and forgive Onesimus of running away and stealing from you."
 - b) To give it one more try, Paul's effectively saying, "I'm not sticking a gun to you head, and I understand he hurt you, but I'm telling you it's the right thing to do, not just so that he'll be a free man, but more importantly, the act will free your (Philemon's) conscious, by not letting the way he hurt you continue to hurt you and harm you. In summary, forgiveness is not about letting people get away with crimes and sins, but only about letting go of the pain that others have caused us. Again, I'm not saying it's easy and as we go through life we may think of other ways people have hurt us and once again, ask God's help in order to let go of that pain.
 - c) Before I move on to Paul's key line in this book, let me pause for a moment and place here a prayer for those who struggle with forgiveness: Heavenly Father, this person or a group of people have hurt me. It's hard for me to let go of the pain, as in effect the pain is all I've got left to focus on of how that person hurt me. Help me to remember that just as You've forgiven me of all my sins, the least I should do in response is let go of the pain I've been holding for this person (or group) that's hurt me. Instead of seeing them as someone who has hurt me, help me to see them as someone who needs your love and forgiveness. I give you all this pain, and I ask for Your strength to help me let go of the anger I've got toward them. I take that anger and place it at Your feet so no pain will block the relationship that You desire we have with each other. I ask this in Jesus name, Amen.
 - d) With that pain out of our system, for the moment, it's time to get back to Paul.

- e) Paul mentions in Verse 19 that he wrote this "with his own hand". I don't know if it did refer to the whole letter, or just the last part. Most commentators speculate that Paul did dictate his letters. It may be due to the "chain" issue, or some suggestion that Paul had an eye problem, which is hinted at in Galatians 4:15. Either way, I suspect the reason it was singled out was so that Philemon would realize it wasn't a forgery and that Paul cared so much for him, he wanted to add this personal touch to the letter.
- f) All of that leads to the last part of Verse 19, which many consider the most famous line in the letter: "I will pay it back--not to mention that you owe me your very self".
 - i) Remember we have no idea how much Onesimus stole when he left. Remember that Philemon could also add the lost cost of labor while he was gone.
 - ii) Personally, I don't think Paul was wealthy. What's implied in the book of Acts, he was constantly on the run from those who were trying to stop him from spreading the Gospel message. I suspect Paul still worked his "day job" of making tents. That is how Paul supported his work.
 - iii) I mention that because Paul effectively says in this letter to Philemon, whatever he owes you, "put it on my tab". Now there's a line to make one feel guilty!
 - iv) That leads to a question I've been pondering: Do we "owe" the people who lead us to Jesus? What about those who prayed for our salvation prior to that event? Are we liable to them? First let me say this and get it out of my system. If anyone who is reading this is lead to Jesus, do not send me any money. I do this strictly because I believe it's what God called me to do and I don't expect financial compensation if I've lead anyone. I was also thinking of a woman who was instrumental in leading me to Jesus. She gave me a few cassette tapes on the Gospel basics. Soon after that I never saw her again and wouldn't know how to track her down. I'm also positive a few others prayed for me. So if you were instrumental on that path, I'm grateful and hopefully I'm passing it forward.
 - v) All those positive thoughts lead me back to Paul and Philemon. I seriously doubt that Paul felt that Philemon owed him anything for that salvation. I just think Paul looked at the situation and thought, "I didn't charge you anything when I lead you to Jesus and when I helped you set up a church in your house. At the least you can "pass it forward", so therefore, since I (Paul) did so much for you (Philemon), "pass it forward" and forgive Onesimus of the pain that he caused you."
- g) Gee John, I'm sure when you put it like that, Philemon did let it go. Now let me ask what is the harder question: How will other slaves see that act? Will it encourage other slaves to run away or at least to steal? To put it in modern terms, what about again, if someone really hurt someone we loved and permanently damaged them, do we just forgive them? What about what others will think? As to the forgiveness issue, I've already pretty much beaten that to death in terms of working to let go of our emotional pain. Still at the same time that person may have to pay society back for what they did.
 - i) Believe it or not, this leads back to Philemon's dilemma. What he could tell any of the other slaves in the area was, "No you're not free to steal or run away, as you'd be a bad witness for Jesus by that action! Further, because I owe Paul for the work he did for me leading me to Jesus, the least I could do for Him is forgive Philemon as a debt payment to Paul."
 - ii) Bottom line is Paul gave Philemon the excuse he could use to fully forgive the man who used to be his slave without having to fear every slave in the neighborhood as a potential thief. God made it possible through this letter not only for Philemon to forgive his former slave, but also to do it in a way that didn't cause a local riot.
 - iii) The lesson for us is when we're in a difficult spot trying to do the right thing, God will in His timing make a way for us to do the right thing and still be His witness to others around us. That's what Paul's letter did in this situation.

- h) Gee John, good for Paul and these other people. I'm glad they were able to work that out in a way that eased all their problems. However, I'm still living with my problem. I have to still face the person who's causing me pain. I'm still dealing with the pain that person's done to me. What do I do? Do I just forgive them and let them keep hurting me? I never said one has to forgive them live. The solution starts with the right attitude. You have to get to a point where one thinks, they may put roadblocks in front of me, but I'm not going to let them harm my relationship with God and the peace I have with that relationship.
- i) I've heard war prisoners say that the way they kept sane is that there was always a part of their mind that their captors couldn't touch. I've also read of some who got through that period of life through the scriptures they memorized. That helped to keep their sanity in a horrid situation.
 - ii) Ok, so how do I deal with that bully? Kill them with kindness. When someone is starting to see that their behavior no longer affects you, they will double up to get the same reaction, and then give up as they realize they're no longer affecting you.
 - iii) My point is it may get worse before it gets better. In the meantime express God's love to them and help them to see that whatever they're doing may physically be a source of pain, but you'll no longer let that pain control your life. I'm not saying it is easy to do, and it usually takes time to get past that pain. However, we can't get better until we start. It starts with praying for them and keep up that prayer until it changes how we see them, not what they're actually doing.
 - iv) Let me also state the obvious in that if we are in an abusive situation, do one's best to get out of that situation if at all possible.
- i) Meanwhile, it's time to get back to Paul. Remember he's the one writing this letter. What is it that Paul hopes to gain by all of this? Remember that Paul sent Onesimus back to his master with this letter, so how does Paul benefit from all of this? That specific question is answered back in Verses 20-21: To state it again, "I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."
- i) Remember what motivated Paul: It wasn't just seeing people get saved, it was also seeing them grow in their relationship with Jesus. That's the joy that Paul wanted. He wanted to get a report back that forgiveness had occurred and Paul acted as a catalyst (an action to speed up another action) by sending him back home.
 - ii) In fact, Paul had confidence that Philemon would do the right thing. Realize Paul spent a good amount of time with Philemon. Paul lead him to Jesus and helped to set up a church in his house. Paul knew enough of his character, that he was sure Philemon would do the right thing and "more so". In Paul's mind, not only would those two become friends, but they'd no longer have a relationship as a slave and an owner, but one of mutual love and respect.
 - iii) One also has to consider how much Onesimus has changed himself. At one point in his life, he was motivated to steal and run away. Now through God's strength, he was going home to "face the music". Paul sent him home, so he too could grow in Jesus by letting go of the pain of the past.
 - iv) By the way, that's a taste of how slavery came to an end in the Roman Empire. As the Christian church grew, so did love and forgiveness of sins. It eventually led to the end of slavery within that empire. I suppose my point is if that type of love can lead to millions of slaves being set free, I suppose that same attitude of forgiveness can help us let go of the pain others have done to hurt us. If you got that, then you got the key point of this lesson.
 - v) Speaking of which, we've only got the epilogue, left to go. This epilogue discusses Paul's plans for the future as well as a few final greetings and blessings as we end this little one chapter letter.

13. Verse 22: And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.
- a) Remember that Paul was in prison in Rome under "house arrest". That probably meant he had some freedom as a prisoner, but still had to wait there for a trial. He was confident he would be found innocent. History records that to be so. If you don't know, it wasn't until some time later when Caesar Nero persecuted Christians that Paul got arrested again. It's at that point he was put to death. I state that background, as we read here Paul's desire is to go back to Colossae, after he got out of prison to see the situation for himself.
 - b) Imagine Philemon reading this part of the letter. It'd be one thing for him to just say, "Yes I forgive him and let him be on his way." It's another thing to realize he'd have to see Paul again, and tell him how it went. This verse shows us that extra incentive Philemon had to do the right thing. Good for him I suppose. How does that affect me?
 - i) What we forget is that each of us have to face God ourselves. He's watching every thing we do and we're accountable to Him. Just as Philemon knew Paul will come to see him one day, so we too have to realize God's going to see us one day as well. Bottom line is just as Philemon knew that day was coming, so we have to realize a day is coming like that, and make it our incentive to do the right thing.
 - c) If you recall in the beginning of this lesson, I made a joke that Philemon must have been a man of some means: He owned at least one slave. His house was big enough that he had a guest room. I hold the view that anyone from any walk of life can be saved. There are a few in even the "best" parts of our land that'll care more about their relationship with God than they do about their wealth. Philemon was one of many examples of such a person.
 - d) Finally, notice Paul said, "In answer to your prayers". Somehow Paul knew that a prayer of Philemon was for Paul to come back to Colossae to be with him. Even though it was a prayer to God, Paul wanted to "answer it" by showing up one day at his doorstep. I have no idea if Paul made it there or not. I just know that Paul was motivated to have as much joy in life as he could and he did that by seeing other Christians grow closer to God.
14. Verse 23: Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.
- a) At this point, we know who was with Paul in prison. There's a classic Christian joke that goes, "Paul didn't see being chained to someone as a punishment, but as an opportunity to be a witness to someone who can't run away!" Think about that line the next time we're in a situation with someone we consider "trouble" for our lives. There's an old joke about a man who thought of "true hell" as being stuck in an elevator forever with someone who is selling life insurance. I don't agree, but that's a little how Paul viewed being chained to a person: That other person can't run away from that situation!
 - b) I could give you a few cross references to these people, but I won't. So you know, Luke is the writer of the Gospel of Luke and Acts. Most likely, Mark refers to the man who wrote the Gospel of Mark. My point is it shows us how others interacted with Paul who were in their own ways influential for Gospel message. My guess is the other two names also did make a difference for Jesus and their names are listed for multitudes of people to read for the last 2,000 years and counting. If nothing else, we learned that Paul wasn't a just a one-man show working for Jesus. He worked with others to make that difference.
 - c) What is interesting is the same names are mentioned in the conclusion of Paul's epistle he wrote to the Colossians. Remember that Philemon's home church was in that city. What I suspect along with many bible commentators is that both epistles were delivered together so Philemon got his at the same time whatever other churches existed in Colossae, did get that letter at the same time.
 - d) Realize all these people didn't travel with the letters. They're just the one's who was with Paul at that time. It showed Philemon that Paul had company to help him and therefore, Philemon shouldn't feel guilty to drop everything and go see Paul immediately.

15. Verse 25: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
 - a) Here's Paul's closing "tag line". Notice Paul doesn't only attribute God's grace to God the Father. Here he attributes it to Jesus. If you have any doubt that Paul considered Jesus to be God, this verse is support of that idea.
 - b) The last thing I want to comment on here is the idea of "our spirit". Christianity describes us as having "body, soul and spirit". The best way to think of it is as follows:
 - i) Our physical body is what dies when we die. I like the illustration that our body is like the "hardware" of a computer that the software is written on. If you bought a new computer and put lots of programs on that computer, the machine itself does not weigh any more than when you first bought it. That's because hardware has a fixed period of life, like our bodies do and wear out over time.
 - ii) The soul is like the software. That's the part that can't die and lives forever. Just as whatever we "write" can be put on a computer and transferred to another one, so I visualize our soul as eternal that can be transferred to say heaven or hell after our death, that's the soul.
 - iii) The spirit is what God "establishes in us" when we get saved. I like the illustration of an army establishing a "beachhead" for further attacks. That's how and why I do think of God taking up residence in us when we dedicate our lives to serving Him. When we give our lives to Jesus, the Spirit of God takes up residence within us. It is then up to us to either ignore God's spirit and minimize His work in our lives, or we work with the Spirit to grow closer to God. That's His role in our lives.
 - iv) That's also way Paul ends this short letter with the reminder to grow in His Spirit as Paul wants all believers to grow closer to God by letting His Spirit work within us to draw us closer to Him. That's why the letter ends the way it does.
16. OK, for those of you who didn't read the whole lesson, I put a "forgiveness" prayer on the eighth page of this lesson, so I won't repeat that as my closing prayer. Instead I'm asking God to bless us as we continue to use our lives for His glory. May He help us to let go of any and all pain of how others have hurt us so that we can draw closer to Him and not let that pain block our relationship with Him in any way. Heavenly Father, bless us as we use our lives to make a difference for You and be a witness for You to the world around us. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.
17. Since this is the last page of a one-book letter, my sources that I use are on the next page.

Supplement: Bibliography

"If I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." (Isaac Newton)

Without prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, all these commentaries are useless. My prayer as I prepare these lessons was for God to show me the things He wanted me to learn, and second, the lessons He wanted me to pass on in my writings. I have quoted many sources throughout these lessons. If any of these writers appeal to you, I invite you to read or listen to them further via the places listed below. I have also quoted other sources not listed, and those names are usually listed in the lessons. These other authors were usually quoted from the materials listed below and taken from those sources.

First and foremost, the greatest commentary on the bible is the bible itself. Here are the bible versions I use in preparation of my lessons. I mostly quote The New International Version (NIV), Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society; The New King James Version (NKJV), Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.; The King James Version (KJV) (no copyright on that version); the English Standard Version. (ESV). The copyright information for the ESV is in point #7 below. The Living Bible (TLB) Copyright © 1971, 1986 by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189; "The Message" copyright © 1993 by Eugene H. Peterson. All rights reserved. All the bible text used in these lessons (except the ESV) is taken from Parsons Software: Electronic Edition STEP Files Copyright © 1999, Parsons Technology, Inc., all rights reserved and from Zondervan Reference Software (32-bit edition) Version 2.6, Copyright © 1989-1998 The Zondervan Corporation.

Here are the commentaries I have referenced over these lessons. The specific commentaries on Philemon are listed first, and then bible-wide commentaries. They're listed in alphabetical order by author. References to audio commentary means the information was gathered via the Internet in MP3® Format, unless otherwise stated:

1. Commentary on Philemon by Jon Courson. It is in book form from Harvest House Publishing. It is also available in MP3® format at <http://www.joncourson.com/>.
2. Commentary on Philemon by Bob Davis. They are available for free in MP3® format at <http://northcountrychapel.com/studies/>.
3. Commentary on Philemon by David Guzik. It is available for free in audio and text format. The web address is http://www.enduringword.com/library_commentaries.htm Mr. Davis quotes a lot of famous authors from the 19th and 20th Century on these books and I've used some of those quotes.
4. Commentary on Titus by John MacArthur. They are available for free in MP3® format at <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons> and then click on those particular books.
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7. The Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia, Zondervan Publications, (via CD-ROM 1998 release). This is a multi-volume encyclopedia with notes on every bible verse. It is available through Zondervan. Paperback books are published on individual Bible books from this same source.
8. The Life Application Bible, Zondervan Publishing: www.zondervanbibles.com/0310919770.htm.
9. The MacArthur Study Bible with commentary by John MacArthur Nelson Bibles (1997) ISBN: 0849912229.
10. I also refer sometimes to J.P. Moreland apologetic ministry which is at www.jpmoreland.com and Greg Koukl's apologetic ministry, which is Stand to Reason at www.str.org. Finally I make references to a Jewish talk show host and Old Testament scholar named Dennis Prager. See dennisprager.com
11. My apology if I have quoted someone else and I have forgotten to include them here.